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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000809

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2017

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SUBJECT: DEFENSE SECRETARY EBDANE -- AN ARROYO LOYALIST IN
A KEY POSITION

REF: MANILA 0359

Classified By: (U) Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. New National Defense Secretary Hermogenes "Jun" Ebdane lacks the sophistication and polish of his predecessor, Avelino Cruz. Nonetheless, he is a committed Arroyo loyalist whom many believe President Arroyo hand-picked to "manage" the 2007 Congressional elections before returning to his previous portfolio as Secretary for Public Works. Ebdane appears to have the support of the senior leadership of the Department of National Defense and Philippine military, with little detectable grumbling in the ranks. Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Esperon is likely to provide the continuity for defense reform and counterterrorism cooperation. END SUMMARY.

LACKLUSTER BUT LOYAL

¶2. (C) Tongue-tied and reticent, Defense Secretary Hermogenes Ebdane stands in stark contrast to his articulate and sophisticated predecessor, Avelino "Nonong" Cruz. However, whatever he may lack in polish, Ebdane makes up in "pull" with President Arroyo -- he is now serving in his third major cabinet position since stepping down as head of the Philippine National Police (PNP) in August 2004. Despite a lackluster tenure as PNP Director General, which witnessed the embarrassing escape of Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist Rohman Fathur al-Ghozi from the PNP's Camp Crame Headquarters, Ebdane went on to serve as National Security Advisor and then Secretary of Public Works and Highways.

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¶3. (C/NF) According to Department of National Defense Undersecretary for Legal and Special Concerns Ricardo Blancaflor, Ebdane is close to Secretary of the Interior and Local Government (and leader of President Arroyo's political party KAMPI) Ronaldo Puno as well as Enrique "Ricky" Razon, the CEO of International Container Terminal Services, two of President Arroyo's largest and staunchest financial backers. An Arroyo loyalist, Ebdane found his name prominently featured in the "Hello Garci" tapes scandal from the controversial 2004 elections. Many believe he helped then-Elections Commissioner Virgilio Garcilliano go into

hiding at the peak of the controversy.

"STILL IN THE RECEIVE MODE"

¶4. (C) Ebdane has admitted to the Ambassador and other Embassy officials that he is "still in the receive mode" and reading-in to his new job, which he assumed on February 1, ¶2007. At one point he joked that he was "in information overload." Ebdane has stressed his support for Philippine Defense Reform, but in meetings accompanied by Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Hermogenes Esperon, he has allowed Esperon to take the lead in describing the program. In an initial conversation with the Ambassador, Ebdane on his own volition brought up the issue of unlawful killings, noting that he had proposed to Executive Secretary Ermita that the Philippines request U.S. forensic assistance in investigating the murders.

¶5. (C) Rumors abound that Ebdane's tenure may not extend much beyond the May 2007 Congressional and local elections. President Arroyo has still not named a new Public Works Secretary, fueling speculation that he may return to his

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former cabinet post once he has "managed" the elections for the Administration to ensure that its candidates win enough seats to avoid a successful impeachment motion again this year.

CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH GENERAL ESPERON

¶6. (C) Despite strident criticism of Ebdane by some senior military leaders privately (and leaked to the press) before his appointment, most top officers now appear willing to accept him, and he appears to have a good -- in fact, even

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close -- relationship with General Esperon. Many have expressed appreciation that he is speeding up procurement, which his predecessor had tried to regulate more carefully. He is a Philippine Military Academy classmate of Undersecretary Ernesto Carolina, the champion for the Defense Reform effort, whom he recently also named as spokesman for the Department of National Defense. Private views of Department of National Defense staff vary. According to one Undersecretary, Ebdane is a "good guy," while another considers him "at best mediocre." We see no indication that Ebdane's appointment has provoked discontent among junior or mid-grade officers, much less the rank-and-file.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Ebdane was far from the best choice President Arroyo could have made to succeed former Secretary Cruz. He is clearly no intellect, but a through-and-through loyalist, a quality that the president, who only a year ago faced down a coup attempt, treasures. We expect few innovations from Ebdane. We will continue to focus our efforts on promoting and institutionalizing defense reform, and strengthening and deepening our counterterrorism cooperation. In both these areas, we have a strong ally in General Esperon.

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